

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE ORIGIN AND WORLDWIDE GROWTH OF THE PENTECOSTAL MOVEMENT

Domenic Marbaniang, Ph.D.

Written for *Biswas Dwara*, Christian Magazine of the Sikkim Pentecostal Church, Jan-Apr 2010

The Pentecostal Movement is one of the largest movements within Christianity. Since its beginning in 1901, it has grown to become one of the largest religious groups in the world. By the year 2000, the Pentecostal/Charismatic constituency is considered to have accounted for 8.7 percent of the world's population, larger than the percentage of all Buddhists, and made up 26.7 percent of all Christendom.¹ This movement has also been called as the "Third Force" and the harbinger of "a revolution comparable in importance with the establishment of the original church and with the Protestant Reformation."² Surprisingly not, this movement was looked at as heretic and fanatical in its incipient period. For instance, the *Los Angeles Times* reported in 1906:

Breathing strange utterances and mouthing a creed which it would seem no sane mortal could understand, the newest religious sect has started in Los Angeles. Meetings are held in a tumble-down shack on Azusa Street, near San Pedro Street, and the devotees of the weird doctrine practice the most fanatical rites, preach the wildest theories and work themselves into a state of mad excitement in their peculiar zeal.³

However, as Edward Caldwell Moore noted "The heresy of one generation is the orthodoxy of the next,"⁴ Pentecostalism is no longer looked upon as a fanatical sect to beware of; but, it certainly has made its impact felt on Christian groups all over the world.

What is Pentecostalism?

Pentecostalism is a movement that centers around the belief in the presence and operation of the Holy Spirit with all the giftings within the Church as was present in the Apostolic period beginning with the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2. The distinguishing belief is that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is an experience following salvation and is evidenced by the gift of Speaking in Tongues. The two main groups related to Pentecostals are the Charismatics and the Third Wave. While the Pentecostals emphasize on the baptism of the Holy Spirit with tongues as evidence, the newer Third Wave movement "stresses "signs and wonders" and gifts such as prophecy and healing, primarily through independent churches and organizations that emerged in the 1980s."⁵ Pentecostals were ostracized by mainline liberals and even evangelicals until 1942; thus, they formed their own denominations⁶ like the Church of God and the Assemblies of God churches along with innumerable smaller denominations and independent churches all over the world.

¹ James Robinson, *Pentecostal Origins* (UK: Paternoster, 2005), p.xxi.

² Henry P. Van Dusen, as quoted by Robinson, *Ibid*, p.xxi.

³ As cited by L. Grant McClung, Jr., *Azusa Street and Beyond* (NJ: Bridge Publishing, Inc., 1986), p. 3.

⁴ Edward Caldwell Moore, *An Outline of the History of Christian Thought Since Kant* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912).

⁵ Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, 3rd edn. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), p. 489.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 490.

Origins

L. Grant McClung, Jr. enumerates one feature of the Pentecostal Movement as being “Leaderless leadership,”⁷ which refers to the fact that “no main personality can be said to be the originator of the movement.”⁸ He quotes Donald Gee:

...one highly significant feature of the Movement that distinguished it in a striking way from most of those that have gone before. The Pentecostal Movement does not owe its origin to any outstanding personality or religious leader, but was a spontaneous revival appearing almost simultaneously in various parts of the world. We instinctively connect the Reformation with Luther, the Quakers with George Fox, Methodism with Wesley, the Plymouth Brethren with Darby and Graves, the Salvation Army with William Booth, and so on. But the outstanding leaders of the Pentecostal Movement are themselves the product of the Movement. They did not make it; it made them.⁹

Roberts Liardon, however, in his book *God's Generals*, calls Charles Fox Parham “The Father of Pentecost.”¹⁰ During the Watch Night Service of December 31, 1900, one of the students, Agnes Ozman, at his Bible school in Topeka approached Parham and asked him to lay his hands on her so she would receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Earlier on, Parham had given an assignment to his students requiring them to study the Biblical evidence of the baptism in the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts. The students had turned in with the general conclusion that “Every recipient baptized by the Holy Spirit spoke in other tongues.” So, when Agnes Ozman approached him, Parham hesitated at first telling her that he himself didn’t speak in other tongues; but, when she persisted, he humbly laid his hands on her head and she immediately was filled with the Spirit and began to speak in the Chinese language. Parham reported that she “was unable to speak English for three days.”¹¹ Later on, Parham himself received the blessing and began preaching about the baptism of the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in tongues. It was through the preaching ministry of Parham, his Bible schools, and his books that Pentecostalism began to find its theological basis. Liardon observes that “though some spoke in tongues long before Topeka, Kansas, it was Parham who pioneered the truth of tongues as the evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit.”¹²

The Pentecostal fire from Topeka spread to various places before it blazed into explosive radiance at Azusa Street. *The Apostolic Faith* magazine of September 1906, published from the Azusa Street Mission by William J. Seymour, the leader of the famous Azusa Street Revival, and Florence L. Crawford, reported:

This work began about five years ago last January, when a company of people under the leadership of Charles Parham who were studying God’s word, tarried for Pentecost in Topeka, Kansas....

Now after five years something like 13,000 people have received this gospel....

⁷ *Ibid*, p.4.

⁸ *Ibid*, p.4.

⁹ *Ibid*, p.4.

¹⁰ Roberts Liardon, *God's Generals* (Tulsa: Albury Publishing, 1996), p.109.

¹¹ As cited by Liardon, *Ibid*, p. 119.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 155.

The meetings in Los Angeles started in a cottage meeting, and the Pentecost fell there three nights. The people had nothing to do but wait on the Lord and praise Him, and they commenced speaking in tongues, as they did at Pentecost, and the Spirit sang songs through them.

The meeting was then transferred to Azusa Street, and since then multitudes have been coming. The meetings begin about ten o'clock in the morning and can hardly stop before ten or twelve at night, and sometimes two or three in the morning, because so many are seeking, and some are slain under the power of God.... We cannot tell how many people have been saved, and sanctified, and baptized with the Holy Ghost, and healed of all manner of sicknesses. Many are speaking in new tongues, and some are on their way to the foreign fields, with the gift of the language.¹³

From these early experiences, Pentecostalism caught momentum and rapidly spread enveloping the whole world in its fire in the next few decades.

Pentecostal Fire in Calcutta

During the Pentecostal outpouring in Los Angeles in 1906, Alfred Garr, pastor of a Burning Bush congregation in Los Angeles, received the baptism of the Holy Spirit and spoke in Bengali – a language he did not know. Following this experience, and recognizing a call to serve in India, he along with his wife, Lilian, came to Calcutta. After arriving in Calcutta, the Garrs found an open door when Pastor Hook invited Garr to conduct services at his Bow Bazar Baptist Church. Soon, the Pentecostal fire sparked into flames on this other side of the world, some 8,000 miles from the Azusa Street Mission.¹⁴ Some of the leaders in India touched by this fire were Miss Susan Easton, head of the American Women's Board of Missions and Fanny Simpson, a Methodist missionary from Boston. During the same time, Rai Bahadur Chandra, a Brahmin convert, heard of the Spirit's outpouring at the meetings conducted by the Garrs and Miss Simpson. On a trip to England, the Chandras came in contact with Elim Pentecostals and received the baptism of the Holy Spirit. On returning to India they constructed a small chapel and residence next door to their house in Baniapukur where the Elim missionaries began conducting English and Bengali services. Later, this work was transferred to the American Assemblies of God.

To the Ends of the Earth

Gary McGee¹⁵ points out three different groups of missionaries who went overseas as a result of the Spirit's outpouring.

(1) The first group represented those who received the call, but left for their mission fields without sufficient resources and training. As a result of this, the overall impact of such work appears to have been short-lived and disappointing. The missionaries soon realized that they definitely needed to learn the local language and culture and needed financial support in addition to long-term strategy for development of indigenous churches.

(2) The second group consisted of those who were newly Spirit-filled veterans of other missionary agencies. These were missionaries like Miss Susan Easton of the American Women's Board of Missions in India and William W. Simpson of the Christian and Missionary Alliance who

¹³ L. Grant McClung, Jr. (ed.), *Azusa Street and Beyond*, p. 24.

¹⁴ Maynard Ketcham and Wayne Warner, "When the Pentecostal Fire Fell in Calcutta," *Ibid*, p. 28

¹⁵ "Early Pentecostal Missionaries – They Went Everywhere Preaching the Gospel," *Ibid*, pp. 33-36.

contributed greatly towards the establishment and development of Pentecostal missions, especially the development of Bible institutes for the training of ministers in keeping with the Spirit of Pentecost.

(3) These institutions prepared a third group of missionaries: men and women who had received Bible institute education in preparation for overseas missions. They were people like Marguerite Flint (India), Eric Booth-Clibbourn (Africa), John Burgess (India), Margaret Felch (India), Grace Walther (India), Ralph Riggs (Africa), and Edgar Pettenger (Africa). The Assemblies of God Bible colleges played an important role in training such personnel for missions.

Pentecostalism also spread strongly through the ministries of evangelists and preachers such as John G. Lake, Aimee Semple McPherson, Smith Wigglesworth, William Branham, A.A. Allen, Kathryn Kuhlman, and Oral Roberts. Thus, Pentecostalism took missionary leaps and spread into the whole world.

Several Pentecostal denominations and fellowships have arisen in the past century. In India, the Indian Pentecostal Church, founded by K. E. Abraham in 1939¹⁶ and the Fellowship of the Pentecostal Churches of God in India, founded by Kurien Thomas in 1966, are examples of indigenous Pentecostal groups. In recent times, the New Life Churches under the leadership of Pastor Joseph in Mumbai and various other places have seen immense growth. There are also myriads of independent Pentecostal churches that continue to rise as the Pentecostal outpouring continues and spreads through out the land. In the global scene, the ministries of people like Benny Hinn, Reinhard Bonnke, Joyce Meyer, and television channels such as the God.tv continue to spread the Pentecostal fire across people groups all over the world.

References

- Cairns, Earle E. *Christianity Through the Centuries*, 3rd edn., Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996.
- Hamilton, Michael P. (ed.). *The Charismatic Movement*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975.
- Kelsey, Morton T. *Tongue Speaking: An Experiment in Spiritual Experience*, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1964.
- Liardon, Roberts. *God's Generals*, Tulsa: Albury Publishing, 1996.
- Lloyd-Jones, David Martyn. *God the Holy Spirit*, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1997.
- McClung, Jr., L. Grant. *Azusa Street and Beyond*, NJ: Bridge Publishing, Inc., 1986.
- Moore, Edward Caldwell. *An Outline of the History of Christian Thought Since Kant*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912.
- Pirouet, Louise. *Christianity Worldwide*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1996, 4th edn.
- Robinson, James. *Pentecostal Origins*, UK: Paternoster, 2005.
- Rodman, William J. *The Era of the Spirit*, New Jersey: Logos International, 1971.
- Synan, Vinson (ed.). *Aspects of Pentecostal- Charismatic Origins*, NJ: Logos International, 1975.
- Synan, Vinson. *The Century of the Holy Spirit*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2001.

¹⁶ <http://www.ipcgeneralcouncil.org/>